
HUME ON THE ARGUMENT FROM DESIGN (*Part 2 of 2*)

Text source:

Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion,
parts 2-8

THE ARGUMENT FROM DESIGN

(advocated by Cleanthes)

1. The Universe resembles an artifact.

(In that it shows order in complexity, and a high degree of apparently purposive organization.)

2. Artifacts are created by designers.

Therefore 3. The Universe was created by a designer.

SOME INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

- First note that the argument *isn't deductively valid*. Its logically possible that the premises are both true but the conclusion false.
 - Rather *it has the character of a probabilistic inference*. The idea is that, given premises 1 and 2, its *probable* (perhaps *very probable*) that the conclusion is true.
 - Hume says that the argument rests on *analogical reasoning*.
 - X is similar to Y in *such-and-such* respects (showing order and complexity), so X is most likely similar to Y in *so-and-so* other respects (being designed) as well.
-

PHILO'S CRITICISMS OF THE ARGUMENT FROM DESIGN

(1) Just how similar is the Universe to an artifact? The weaker the similarity, the less compelling the analogy between them.

The closer A resembles B-type things, the more likely it is they have the same sort of cause. But if A is not so similar to B-type things, then the analogy is thus far undermined. (DCNR, part 2 para 7-8; also 5.1-2)

PHILO'S CRITICISMS OF THE ARGUMENT FROM DESIGN (*cont.*)

(2) These arguments from experience are stronger when a whole series of similar previous cases have been seen to match the inference. But the Universe is a one-off case.

(DCNR part 2 para. 24)

(3) Moreover, in this case the analogy is between a whole (the Universe) and some its parts (artifacts). But “*can a conclusion, with any propriety be transferred from the parts to the whole*”?

(DCNR part 2 para. 18, 20)

PHILO'S CRITICISMS OF THE ARGUMENT FROM DESIGN (*cont.*)

(4) There are many other analogies that fit the Universe as well as that of an artifact. We have to consider all of these before deciding that the design hypothesis is the best available explanation.

- ❑ The Universe seems to resemble an ***animal*** or a ***vegetable*** as much as it does an ***artifact***. So there is as much reason to suggest that the Universe was born or grew like an animal or vegetable as there is to say it was designed.
 - ❑ Notice also other rival hypotheses like the “***old Epicurean hypothesis***” that the ordered Universe arose through a random chaos of atoms falling into self-recreating patterns over time (p.455). (Note the similarity here to evolutionary theory).
-

PHILO'S CRITICISMS OF THE ARGUMENT FROM DESIGN (*cont.*)

(5) If the structure and organization of the material world requires explanation in terms of a designer, doesn't the same go for the structure and organization of the posited designer? A regress looms. (*"Let us remember the story of the Indian philosopher and his elephant."*)

If the Universe and the things in it resemble artifacts in that they show order in complexity and a high degree of (apparently purposive) organization, doesn't the same go for the mind that is posited to explain them? But if so, and if the order of the Universe indicated that it must have a designer, then surely just the same thing goes for the designer Himself: He too must have a designer, and so on!

(DCNR, part 4 para. 6-11)

PHILO'S CRITICISMS OF THE ARGUMENT FROM DESIGN (*cont.*)

(6) Even if the argument works, and we do have reason to infer from the Universe to a designer, the argument still provides no reason to think that that designer is (i) *infinite*, (ii) *perfect*, or (iii) *unitary* (rather than design-by-committee).

(DCNR part 5 para. 5-8)

PHILO'S CRITICISMS OF THE ARGUMENT FROM DESIGN (*cont.*)

“In a word, Cleanthes, a man, who follows your hypothesis, is able perhaps, to assert, or conjecture, that the universe, arose from something like design: **But beyond that position he cannot assert one single circumstance, and is left afterwards to fix every point of his theology, by the utmost license of fancy and hypothesis.** This world, for aught he knows, is the first rude essay of some infant Deity, who afterwards abandoned it, ashamed of his lame performance; it is the work only of some dependent, inferior Deity; and it is the object of derision to his superiors: it is the production of old age and dotage in some superannuated Deity; and ever since his death has run on at adventures ... You justly give signs of horror, Demea, at such strange suppositions: But these, and a thousand more of the same kind, are Cleanthes's suppositions [given his argument from design], not mine. And **I cannot, for my part, think, that so wild and unsettled a system of theology is, in any respects, preferable to none at all.**”

(DCNR, part 5 para 12)

WHAT, ULTIMATELY, IS HUME'S ATTITUDE TO THE ARGUMENT FROM DESIGN?

- Does Hume think that Philo's various criticisms of the argument from design refute it altogether?
 - Or does Hume think that his points merely weaken the *force* of the analogy and thereby weaken the *probabilistic inference* to a cause of the universe somewhat like the cause of artifacts?
-

PHILO'S FAMOUS (*HIGHLY QUALIFIED*) ACCEPTANCE OF THE DESIGN ARGUMENT

“If the whole of natural theology, as some people seem to maintain, resolves itself, into one simple, though somewhat ambiguous, at least undefined proposition, *that the cause or causes of order in the universe probably bears some remote analogy to human intelligence*: **If** this proposition be not capable of extension, variation, or more particular explication: **If** it afford no inference that affects human life, or can be the source of any action or forbearance: And **if** the analogy, imperfect as it is, can be carried no farther than to the human intelligence; and cannot be transferred, with any appearance of probability, to the other qualities of mind: **If** this really be the case, what can the most inquisitive, contemplative and religious man do more than give a plain, philosophical assent to the proposition, as often as it occurs” (DCNR part 12, para. 32)
